Making Use of Redundancy in Listening and Speaking

By Desmond R. Burton

One of the major problems for students practising listening comprehension in English is knowing where to focus attention. They often attempt to hear and understand every word of a sentence, believing that each one is equally important. Inevitably they cry out, "Please, Teacher, more slowly!"

This appeal for help may be interpreted as meaning "All the words seem to be joined together and I haven't a clue as to what you are talking about." But it may equally well mean "I got the gist of what you said but missed a few words in the middle, and that worries me."

All languages employ redundancy in varying degrees, although many language students may never have had it pointed out to them in their native language. Yet it is crucial for students learning a second language to be aware of this feature. As Ur (1984) has pointed out:

The ability to make do with only a part of what is heard and understand the main message is a vitally important one for effective language in a communicative situation.

However, Ur suggests that an awareness of redundancy should be fostered through conscious practice "once the learner has moved over from intensive to extensive listening." My own contention is that it can be acquired at the most basic stages of learning a second language.

It is easy to demonstrate redundancy in simple question/answer situations. In the question "Where did you go yesterday?" the first and last words convey the essential message. Even a failure to hear "you" would not normally affect comprehension, since in a one-to-one situation it would be rather strange to ask "Where did I go yesterday?" With the use of nonverbal communication strategies (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) there is little chance of ambiguity. Yet for many students, especially if they have been trained in the past to focus on structure, there will be an urge to try to grasp every word, and in their attempt to decipher the middle of the question-especially if spoken at normal speed-they will quite probably lose the message altogether.

Setting

Thai students are noted for their classroom shyness, partly caused by fear of making mistakes in front of others. This is particularly so in classes with participants of mixed ages, abilities, and status. With educational standards improving rapidly, it is not unusual now to find organisations where junior staff members are stronger in English than their seniors in age and rank. When they are sitting together in a language class, the tension can be considerable.

As part of my teaching assignment at the Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University, I was recently asked to teach "mainly conversation" to a class of 12 administrators. The initial assessment and meeting had revealed a wide range in ability, from "competent user" to students unable to speak or read a sentence (a range of 76% to 6% using the first half of a Nelson Quick Check structure test). Although the formation of two groups would have been preferable, this was not practical, so there was no alternative but to persevere with all of them studying together.

Procedure

Clearly it was necessary from the outset to build on the students' current level of comprehension. Almost all could understand a few basic questions, such as "How are you?" "What's your name?" "Where do you work?" "Who is Somsri?" even though they could probably not give grammatically accurate responses.

We agreed (in Thai) that if they were ever required to use English in their work environment, it would normally be in question-answer situations where they would not actually have to say very much (e.g., visitors asking the way; telephone callers asking to speak to someone; etc.). I explained that quite often in these basic situations just one word (or simply an appropriate action) is sufficient as a response.

I illustrated this by writing the main question words on the board for reference, and then asking students to give any coherent response. For example, if the question "Where?" elicited the response "Five o'clock," the student was not understanding. But if s/he answered "Home" or "Bangkok," coherency and comprehension is demonstrated. Since I only expected one or two words in response to my questions, the potential for grammatical error was almost eliminated. Students very quickly understood that they were expected to give more than random answers, and that a (usually true) situation could be built up with ease.

For example:

Where? Bangkok.
When? Next week.
Why? Seminar.

After several questions, I then asked the stronger students to explain what was going to happen:

"Somsri is going to Bangkok next week for a seminar.

By this means, even the weakest members of the class were able to participate in genuine communication; and the strong students were able to display their ability. Occasionally situations could be interpreted in more than one possible way, which caused a good deal of amusement, and led to the need for further explanation. What was important, however, was that both groups became more confident, and tension was noticeably reduced.

Students soon began to take the initiative and ask their own questions.

For example:

What (one student points)? A watch
What kind? Seiko
How much? I don't know
Why? A present Who? Boyfriend

The second stage was to introduce the idea that when listeners hear no question-word but realise from intonation and other contextual clues that a question is being spoken, a Yes/No answer is normally required. Again, one word can carry a simple message, such as "Finished?" "Hungry?" and again there is very little likeli- hood of ambiguity or misunderstanding.

The third stage was to introduce more specific questioning by the use of more than one word, such as "Where/Saturday?" "When/shopping?" and to use this format to practice giving appropriate, coherent responses.

Finally, and without warning, I began to ask complete, simple questions (at first with slightly exaggerated emphasis on content words). By now students were unperturbed by tense and structure, and were able to give plenty of good responses, albeit short ones. The stronger students were able to give fuller responses, of course, and were encouraged to do so.

Conclusions

Purists may take me to task for allowing students to use "broken" English. However, verb conjugations and tense distinctions always cause great difficulty for Thais, and any strategy to alleviate this problem is welcome so that they can concentrate their efforts on message comprehension.

I would suggest that whatever theoretical criticisms may be made of this technique, the end more than justified the means, at least for these students, who needed some degree of immediate success. This justification may be summarised as follows:

1. Communication was varied and interesting, and involved the bridging of a genuine information gap.
2. The awareness that they were successfully communicating, without making lots of grammatical mistakes, provided students with a stimulus to speak when they felt able.
3. Students of very different standards were able to study together and gain useful practice in the language.
4. They began to distinguish content and structure words, and learned how to focus on the message.
5. They became aware of the importance of nonverbal communication strategies.
6. All members of the class greatly enjoyed this kind of activity.

Obviously this very simple conversation technique did not occupy the entire class time, but it was pleasing to find that after six hours of the course, students had developed a much more positive attitude towards the language. In short, I believe that this was largely because they were taught at a very basic stage to focus on what they understood, and could respond to, rather than on what, in most cases, was not essential to the message being conveyed.

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